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On diplomatic forgeries battles Soviet for

The controversy over the forged Hitler diaries has put the international spotlight on the murky segment of international espionage dealing with diplomatic and intelligence forgeries designed to blemish the reputations and undermine the credibility of governments and statesmen. Washington Times diplomatic correspondent Peter Almond examines this world of disinformation and document forgery, beginning today in the first of three articles.

By Peter Almond
WASHINGTON TIMES STAFF

Sophisticated Washingtonians would have spotted the "leaked memo" as a forgery right away: It didn't read right, it didn't look right, and an implication that two Nigerian political leaders should be assassinated certainly didn't smack of something a U.S. official would send in a memo to an American ambassador.

But the "memo" surfaced in Lagos, the Nigerian capital, and ran in a newspaper there on April 13. It was picked up by wire services, sent around Africa and reported — with embellishments — by the press in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union as another example of assassination plots involving the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

"We denied it, and we showed who we thought was behind it," a State Department intelligence official said. "For the most part, the Nigerians accepted our explanations. But there has been some damage. You can never completely clean off the mud if someone is inclined to believe stories like that."

The Nigeria "memo" is the latest example of what the Reagan administration is convinced is a long-established and well-orchestrated campaign of "disinformation" by the Soviet Union and its allies to discredit the United States around the world.

Since the State Department took over tracking the campaign from the CIA at the end of 1981 — on the theory that if the Russians want publicity for its forgeries, why should the United States keep quiet? — the United States has logged some 17 Soviet-sponsored forgery cases designed to embarrass the United States. Five of them have surfaced so far this year.

What convinced the U.S. intelligence analysts that the Soviet Union was behind the Nigerian "memo" was the language of one sentence. Writing of the need to go ahead with Operations "Heartburn" and "Headache" — code words apparently referring to the eliminations of Obafemi Awolowo, head of the opposition Unity Party, and M.K.O. Abiola, a leading business and political figure — the "memo" from a U.S. Information Service employee to U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering states:

"The Department must be well briefed on these wet affairs. In view of these 'catastrophes' a premise will be created to install a friendly military government in Nigeria after a random purge of the present 'corrupt' federal administration."

The State Department official noted that no American would refer to assassinations as "wet affairs." The phrase does, however, translate directly to *Mokre Dela*, the Russian phrase for assassination most frequently associated with the NKVD, the Soviet secret police during much of the Stalin era.

"It's just a sloppy bit of translating from Russian to English," the intelligence official said. "These forgeries have lots of mistakes of spelling, addressing, use of un-American phrases and things like that which tell us right away who's behind them."

... always put us on the defensive."

Nigeria, for instance, has not formally declared the matter completely dead. For its own internal political reasons (apparently to seem skeptical of U.S. government explanations) as the country prepares for national elections on Aug. 6, the Nigerian government has appointed a special tribunal to try to find the source of the "memo."

In neighboring Ghana, another forged memo — this one supposedly from a West German Embassy official reporting the attitude of U.S. Ambassador Ronald Smith toward Ghanaian leader Jerry Rawlings — is considered at the State Department to have had one of the most serious effects of all the Soviet-inspired documents

because it was specifically raised by a senior Ghanaian government official, and the Ghanaian government has failed so far to publicly accept West German and American protestations that it is fraudulent.

It has prompted what one State Department official diplomatically refers to as "worsened relations" between the United States and Ghana. Another official said relations "plummeted" following the incident, and another said they remain "difficult."

The report allegedly quoted Ambassador Smith as describing Rawlings as "impulsive, eccentric, lacking in intellectual and leadership ability, fond of military uniforms and afraid for his life." It also said that Smith had tried to stir up opposition and connected Smith and the CIA with opposition groups in secret meetings.

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